University of Victoria

Speech on China-Japan relations

By Ambassador Joseph Caron

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you this evening.

(open with general remarks on the event)

Let me begin by quoting the opening sentences of two classics of Asian literature.

> The bell of the Gion temple tolls into everyman's heart, to warn him that all is vanity and evanescence. The faded flowers of the sala trees by the Buddha's deathbed bear witness to the truth that all who flourish are destined to decay.
>
> the Tale of the Heike

> Here begins our tale. The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been.
>
> the Three Kingdoms

When I was sent to China as Ambassador in 2001, and then when I returned to Japan as Ambassador in 2005, I was frequently asked about the differences between China and Japan.

Occasionally, I pointed to the opening lines above of the Chinese Sanguo Yanyi, the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, and the Japanese Heike Monogatari, the Tale of the Heike, the Minamoto and the Taira, to explain some of the contrasts that I observed.

Many in the audience will recognize both of the great novels as fictionalized history wrapped in swashbuckling medieval stories of fallible heroes and complex villains, numberless battles and endless bloodletting, political infighting and honest love stories. It's hard to imagine that the two putative authors - Yukinaga and Luo Guanzhong - were not thinking of Hollywood and Dreamworks Entertainment and Spielberg and Zhang Yimou when they put brush to paper.

Both books are so lengthy and sprawling – my edition of the Three Kingdoms has 2,300 pages, and my Heike comes in at a modest 800 pages - that anything that you say about either can be demonstrably false and demonstrably true, so you are pretty safe is saying anything want about them.

My own take on these two monumental works is captured in the opening lines. The Three Kingdoms, to my mind, is fundamentally about power and its pursuit, with clear statist objectives - the restoration of the Han Dynasty by the Shu, and their fight against Wei and eastern Wu to establish new dynasties – and the strategies and tactics necessary to victory.

One could certainly offer the political assessment of the struggle between the Taira and the Minamoto clans described in the Heike Monogatari, but to my mind, this great tale is much more about Buddhist fatalism and the expiation of souls, as made clear in the sentence that I quoted. It is about the samurai and bushido morality and about love.

Both of these books are wildly popular in their respective countries, and the Three Kingdoms is very well known in Japan, Korea and Singapore. Nevertheless, these two great works are first and foremost very different, and in that, they reflect some of the immense contrasts between the Japanese and Chinese in the past and the Japanese and Chinese today. However idiosyncratic, the lesson I take from these two classics as I read them thus includes the vast cultural differences prevailing between Japan and China. So my opening point is that cultural differences between the Chinese and Japanese are such that such differences rather than similarities have to be the start of any understanding of their official and diplomatic relations. If I did a survey of the people in this room, I am certain that we would all propose a myriad other examples.

As a diplomat, in obtaining a deeper understanding of Japan and China, and in doing my work, I gathered few lessons in one country that I could directly apply in the other.

Another example is the fundamental differences in the traditional world view of China and Japan, much greater than you would find between to great historical European powers.

China, at the height of its grandeur – especially the Ming and Qing Empires - had adopted a universalist perspective, based on informed views of the known, civilized world. Overwhelming cultural power and prestige, as much as territorial accretion, defined for the Chinese their place in the world. The Chinese were hardly the first to consider their civilization to be at the center of the world – at various times, the Greeks, Romans, Indians and others had a similar sense of themselves, and Zhongguo, Chugoku, “the middle kingdom” only gained currency during the Qing, but geographic breadth and topography, historical sweep and a large population made of the Han and tributary states on their periphery the biggest power in the neighborhood. For many in China, this sense is, arguably, emerging again in the 21st century.

Japan’s world view for many centuries could not have been more different. In fact the Chinese inadvertently captured this best I think, as early as the 3rd century, when the Wei Chronicles described “the people of Wa, living in the middle of the ocean, on mountainous islands, northeast of Kaifang”.

The Japanese largely stayed on these islands for most of their history, venturing forth only in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, in the 7th century, again and forcefully in the 16th, and then, disastrously, in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. This latter imperial polity still defines Japan’s image in the minds of many people around the world, but in fact, this outward thrust was truly exceptional.

Indeed, Japan spent part of its history preventing and outlawing both outward and inward contact, through centuries of exclusion, Sakoku, making Japan almost totally self-sufficient when not fully autarchic. This bred a 'shima guni kankaku' , an island mentality - totally different from the cosmopolitan reality of China. It can still be found today in Japanese popular culture and even in politics.

Inevitably, these existential views greatly influenced the 2000 years of relations between the Chinese and Japanese.

China-Japan interaction has thus varied from continuous and intense, to sporadic when not hostile. Thanks to the arrival of Chinese scholars beginning early in the 6th century and the significant transfer of the Chinese cultural norms of the Tang Empire until the end of the 9th century, Japan acquired many of the foundations and much of the raw material of its governance and high culture: the Chinese writing system, Confucianism, Buddhism, imperial rule.

But then throughout much of the subsequent five dynasties, Sung and Yuan periods, official contact was very limited, when it existed at all. Relations – official, trade, scholarly, resumed during the Ming Dynasty, in the 14th century, and lasted through the Ashikaga, Sengoku and Muromachi Eras in Japan but with the arrival of the Tokugawa and the re-introduction of seclusion policies in the first half of the 17th century, Japan again chose to severely limit its contact with China (as well as the emerging West), and that for 200 years.

Then we come to the Meiji restoration, the rise of militarist Japan, and decades of imperial depredations. Were it that these raw and murderous events had taken place several centuries ago, their immediacy would have been lost to distant memories, and the dialogue between the Japanese and Chinese could perhaps reflect the broad sweep of history, not its freshest and most disastrous events. This, however, is wishful thinking. Given this lengthy and very heterodox experience, and to grossly over-simplify, Japanese and Chinese – certainly at the popular level – can have very different interpretations of their relations over the centuries. When I was in China, one frequently came across the view that China was rewarded for providing 2,000 years of cultural enrichment to Japan with Japanese pirates, Japanese colonialism and Japanese imperialism.
The Japanese, for their part, recognize and acknowledge responsibility for the immense damage to life and property caused by 50 years of imperialism and colonialism, but argue, quite reasonably, that this unfortunate and regrettable period does not alone describe two millennia of fruitful contact.

I don't want to get too carried away with this very broad brush, but I think that the immense differences in cultural development, the fundamentally different world views of Japan and China in the pre-modern period and the residual default sentiments that are retained today, and general lack of a common and agreed historical narrative, these facts are inescapably part of the long game in China and Japan, and remain today significant determinants of their relations.

I believe that these fundamental differences, this lack of consensus, this basic alienation, even as it does not describe all of the founding elements of the China-Japan relationship, nevertheless impacts in subtle and meaningful ways on the bilateral relations between the two.

Let me point to three such impacts.

There are many scholars and students here this evening, as well as, presumably weekend international relations theorists, so firstly, let me address my comments to them, and suggest that the fundamental bilateral alienation I have been describing should be an underlying principle, at least at the outset, of a study of China-Japan relations.

My own understanding of Japan-China relations takes this alienation, this "anarchy", to use the theoretical term, as a given. Accordingly, I think that the best theoretical tool to begin to understand this relationship is neo-realism.

I appreciate that IR theory is not aimed primarily at describing the interaction between two states. It aims to understand international systems. But to my mind, it is not possible to understand and then act in a bilateral relationship without knowledge of the two countries' basic foreign policies, as well as some assumptions about the international systems within which their relationship is played out.

In this respect, the theories of international relations can be very useful to diplomacy.

For example, I believe that you cannot understand Canada's foreign policy without an elementary grasp of liberal internationalism, neo-realism and some sort of neo-functionalism best expressed by NAFTA.

Of all of the international relations constructs that are available off-the-shelf to those approaching the study China-Japan relations – realism, liberal internationalism, functionalism, constructivism, game theories, socio-historical approaches, expected utility theories and so forth, I find none as useful as the power centered, interest calculation framework of neo-realism.

Starting with a different understanding of history and respective world views, a student of China/Japan relations must proceed brick by brick, assessing each country's self-described interests, and strengths and capabilities. Only then can you proceed and study their bilateral relationship.

China is very explicit, systematic and determined in its effort to develop the calculus of national power – diplomatic, economic, military, technological, access to energy and so forth – without which the Chinese believe they cannot pursue fully the achievement of their national interests.

Japan possesses a much more mature, global economy and it is secure in its alliance with the United States.

That is the starting point for both of them. Indeed, looking at things from that perspective, and while "ultimate reconciliation" between China and Japan is perhaps conceivable in the long term, I don't believe that there can be some sort of aggregated "grand bargain" between Japan and China any time soon, the kind of fundamental architecture based on common interests and values that links, for example, Canada to the United States, or as was agreed upon between France and Germany in the Élysé Agreement of 1963. I don't see Hu and Abe holding hands at a war memorial in the way that Mitterand and Kohl did at Verdun to commemorate the two million dead at Verdun.

Each issue in the China-Japan nexus that unites and divides them has to be looked at individually. I do not foresee in the short or medium term a kind of neo-liberal trans-governmental or transnational dynamic that can over-ride or even ignore the policies and personalities of the respective governments.

If you accept this argument, the second consequence of this very broad analysis of the Japan-China relationship is the requirement that both countries proceed with deliberation and positive intent in the active construction of their linkages. In other words, there is a built-in requirement for continuous, strong and high-level guidance and engagement.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China and the re-assumption of sovereignty by the government of Japan through the San Francisco Peace Treaty occurred within a few years of each other. And while Japan maintained diplomatic relations with the Republic of China in Taiwan for 20 years following San Francisco, there were various forms of contact with the PRC throughout this period, despite the fact that Japan operated under the fundamental "principle of separate political and economic relations" and China on the equally fundamental "principle of the inseparability of political and economic relations".

The decade or so following establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Japan in 1972 was one of putting in place the architecture of their linkages in areas such as trade, aviation, fisheries and, of course, the famous Treaty of Peace and Friendship. This building process very closely paralleled the first decade of the Canada and China relationship as well. This kind of building activity keeps governments busy.

From my observations, the role of governments in defining, promoting and managing bilateral ties varies tremendously depending on the similarities or differences in levels of economic development, compatibility of values, political institutions and the like. The role of the government of Canada in shaping and managing our relations with Japan is relatively small – civil society, the business sector, the tourism industry, universities and so forth are much larger actors in the relationship. It is a classic neo-liberal relationship. At the other extreme, Canada's relations with the DPRK are almost exclusively government directed.

This brings me to the third consequence of my basic analytical framework.

In the case of Japan and China, it is my view that political leadership and government actions will remain, for the foreseeable future, the most important factors driving the relationship forward. Put another way, there is only a limited amount of built-in automaticity in the relationship between the two countries.

Despite the fact that trade between China and Japan now exceeds us $200 billion per year; that 10 million Chinese owe their employment to the $24 billion invested by Japanese firms on the mainland; that well-over 4 million Chinese and Japanese visited each other's country in 2006; that 110,000 Chinese pursue their studies in Japan, and 20,000 Japanese students are in China; and despite the fact that the dynamics are such that all of these numbers will only increase in the coming years, they alone will not obviate the need for strong governmental and political guidance.

The fact is that China and Japan must tackle an extraordinary number of difficult issues, in the conduct of their day-to-day relations.

These are not limited to but include: the understanding and teaching of history; overlapping territorial claims; overlapping sea-bed claims; access to energy; differences of view over united nations reform and membership to the security council; different visions of Asian regional integration; global competition for resources; national and regional security; differences in respective defense postures; relations with Taiwan, bilateral trade issues, DPRK diplomacy and so forth.

This is a very large number of issues. We worry, in Canada, when we have 3 or 4 big issues on the table. The Chinese and Japanese have a dozen.

Few of their bilateral problems can be resolved in the near term, but all must be managed, and intensely so, from the short to the long term, if the other, non-government parts of the relationship are to advance smoothly.

Few if any of these issues can be solved through the workings of civil society and business relations, or even bureaucratic mechanisms. All require deliberation and agreement between the leaders and senior levels of the governments of the two countries, including in some cases, perhaps many cases, agreement to disagree. The visit to Beijing of Prime Minister Abe on October 8 and the availability of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao despite the concurrent National People's Congress demonstrated the transformative power of such leadership, and contrasted it with its absence.

Given the unique history and circumstances underpinning China-Japan ties, I don't see an alternative to active, top down management of such a complex and significant relationship.

The two countries may now generally agree that they need a strategic relationship but wishing for one is no substitute for the hard work of building one.

The good news is that there is now a political dynamic in place to move some of their issues forward, and that the world shares in the benefits of successful Japan-China engagement. The challenge will be to sustain this engagement, knowing full well that no leader is ever fully in control of national circumstance and political debate.

Thank you for your attention.